

Staying in the Black:

Tips for Operating a Cost-Effective Simplified Summer Food Program

The Simplified Summer Food Program plays a critical role for low-income children when school is out. It ensures that they have access to healthy meals during the summer months and attracts children to educational and enrichment programs that help prepare them to return to school in the fall. The following are some strategies for operating a cost-effective Simplified Summer Food Program.

Program Planning and Logistics

- Serve breakfast and lunch at all sites. (This increases the amount of meals you serve and creates a larger economy of scale.)
- Adjust serving times to maximize the number of children attending the site. (For example, often children are more likely to eat breakfast later in the morning during the summer months. Consider serving breakfast at 9:30 a.m. instead of 7 a.m.)
- Contact the state agency contract manager immediately with menu changes. In some cases, unapproved menu changes cause meals to be disallowed.
- For new sponsors, work with the state agency to make accurate meal pattern predictions so there is not a significant number of extra meals. Many new sponsors overestimate the number of children that will initially come to the site.
- Have a system in place with the vendor to allow changes in the number of meals delivered so that the site does not receive more meals than they need.
- Use volunteers whenever possible to help with the meal service, which allows you to cut down on labor costs.
- When looking to add sites, target programs that already have staff that can be utilized to serve the meals and take the meal counts.

Daily Operations

- Plan menus with healthy child-friendly food to limit plate waste.
- Create menus that allow the program to use leftover food the following day and plan Friday meals that will keep until Monday. (It is important to follow all food safety requirements to ensure that all meals served are safe to eat.)
- Make sure that staff at all sites understand the importance of accurate meal counts so that all paperwork is filled out properly.
- Access lower-cost food and less expensive paper products such as utensils, cups, and napkins, through your community's food bank.

Participation Rates

- High participation rates throughout the summer help ensure that the summer meals program is cost effective, which makes outreach crucial.
- Work with schools and community partners to promote summer meal sites.
- Use banners, posters, backpack mail, direct mailings, neighborhood canvassing and other outreach methods to inform children and parents about the Simplified Summer Food Program.
- Ask local companies and foundations to provide funding support for summer meals outreach.
- For more outreach strategies to increase participation, visit www.frac.org/summer.

